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Roger Frie, a psychoanalyst with a PhD in phenomenological psychology and psychology, and a Psy.D. in clinical psychology, has edited a volume with the specific aim of addressing the challenge of postmodernism for psychotherapy, and the broader goal of demonstrating the interaction between the clinical practice of psychotherapy and philosophical thinking. He has assembled essays by nine contributors, each one addressing, in his/her own way, the postmodern debate in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. The contributors are all distinguished experts on specific thinkers and topics (e.g., Maurice Friedman on Buber, Daniel Burston on Erich Fromm, Eugene Gendlin on the technique of focusing). Herein lie the strengths and the limitations of this book.

While the collection is certainly interdisciplinary in scope, some individual authors appear somewhat narrow in their interdisciplinary flavor, primarily emphasizing their own previous work. Gendlin’s chapter cites Gendlin for 8 out of its 12 references, Friedman cites himself for 7 of his references, and M. Guy Thompson cites himself 8 times.

Each expert does, however, come around to addressing the challenges of postmodernism. First, however, many of the experts provide another summary of their own basic work, summaries with which many readers are already familiar. Betty Cannon’s chapter, “Sartre’s contribution to psychoanalysis”, repeats some paragraphs, almost word for word, from her paper, “Sartre and existential psychoanalysis” (Cannon 1999), published in a special issue of The Humanistic Psychologist, entitled “Understanding Existence”, and guest edited by Frie himself. Similarly, M. Guy Thompson’s chapter, “The primacy of experience in R.D. Laing’s approach to psychoanalysis” appears to be based on Thompson’s earlier publication, “The heart of the matter: R.D. Laing’s enigmatic relationship to psychoanalysis”, which immediately follows Cannon’s paper in the special issue of The Humanistic Psychologist (Thompson, 1999). Thompson’s 1999 article was also simultaneously published in Psychoanalytic Review (Thompson, 2000). There is nothing inherently wrong in getting full mileage from a paper, but perhaps the editor should have mentioned that some of the contributions are expanded versions of previously published papers, and make specific references to the precursor articles.

Roger Frie does provide an excellent introduction to the issues sparked by postmodernism. In postmodernism, a reaction to the modernist themes of essentialism, same-
ness, and universality, the individual is seen as embedded in social, historical, and especially linguistic contexts, not only shaped by these contexts, but subverted by them. The dilemma of postmodernism is the resulting denial of the individual, at its extreme the death of the subject: the denial that there is any meaningful individual person at all. “Once the concept of the person is altogether subverted, the notion of personal agency is similarly undermined. And without a psychological agent who develops, changes, and learns, the therapeutic process appears to lose its meaning.” (p. 3). The aim of Frie’s book is to formulate a conception of the person that accounts for psychological agency and individuality, avoiding the stereotypes of postmodernism without succumbing to the excesses of modernism.

A phenomenological/existential perspective can acknowledge the importance of the social, linguistic and historical contexts emphasized by postmodernism, but fundamentally sees the self as individual, autonomous, and as characterized by freedom and agency. The extent to which an individual can influence his/her environment and human relationships is also impoverished in postmodernism, leading postmodernism to refuse to be open to the full human phenomenon. Postmodernism views the self either as an non-relational entity or as a social construct; Friedman, inspired by Buber, argues that it is precisely in the life of dialogue and mutual influence that the self discovers and realizes its uniqueness (p. 56). Psychotherapy, at its best, is openness to this dialogue, a way out of the strictures both of postmodernism and of modernism. Instead of being totally determined, the therapist, Buber writes, “must be ready to be surprised.” (p. 60)

Other individual chapters in this volume may in part be restatements of the authors’ well-known positions, but they also contain many pearls. Frie provides excellent summaries of Lacan and Binswanger. Frie critiques postmodernism for its excessive emphasis on language, thereby minimizing pre-linguistic, non-verbal and bodily experience. He utilizes Binswanger in this regard: “... under certain circumstances [the body] remains the only form of expression left to people ... instead of scolding and raging, the human being chortles, belches, screeches and vomits” (p. 148). The human self cannot be totally captured through linguistic determinism.

Frederickson’s brief description of Husserl’s thoughts in two paragraphs is succinct and relevant to the debate over postmodernism. Husserl’s contribution, in Frederickson’s summary, was to reconcile the split between sense experience and rationality: “all experience is already inherently thoughtful because the nature of consciousness is intentional, which is to say the act of consciousness and its object are given in one stroke” (p. 189). This has relevance to psychotherapy, since a good interpretation is not intended to explain a client’s experience, but to deepen it. As soon as we realize